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HEADLINE: Lower Shore played key role in War of 1812

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BODY:

SALISBURY -- Using a long steel probe, Bill Wilson searched deep in the soft, ivy-covered ground in a graveyard in the residential community of Nithsdale, hoping to find the tombstone of Brig. Gen. Thomas Humphreys.

"It was here years ago, but vandals have broken other tombstones in the graveyard. His may have sunk into the ground or even been stolen," said Wilson, a member of the Lower Eastern Shore Heritage Council. "He served in the state militia from Somerset County during the War of 1812."

With Wilson were Jay Parker, the council's executive director, and fellow member Lisa Ludwig, project manager.

"We are trying to learn more about the War of 1812 in our area," Parker said, "and finding the grave of Humphreys is a start."

The council is hosting a special luncheon program Wednesday at the Henson Center at the University of Maryland Eastern Shore. The keynote speaker is Scott Sheads, a War of 1812 historian and ranger at the Fort McHenry National Monument. He will speak on the Chesapeake Bay's role in the War of 1812.

"This special program is a kickoff for the commemoration of the War of 1812 on the Eastern Shore," Wilson said. "There is also a national celebration. The War of 1812 was the second war of independence and, if we had lost, our country would have been a colony of England. Since the Chesapeake Bay was a primary battleground for the war, this program is a way for area residents to inform themselves of the history and how it affected us."

The commemoration program prompted area historians to ask themselves about the involvement of Somerset, Worcester and Wicomico counties in the war, only to find out there is no single source of extensive information regarding the Lower Shore's role in the historic event.

"We really need to pull things together because we know, on a case-by-case basis, that the Lower Shore was very

much involved in the War of 1812," Wilson said.

The War of 1812 history was almost at his doorstep; in Nithsdale, where Wilson lives, Brig. Gen. Thomas Humphreys is buried in a family plot near his home.

Wilson, who represents Wicomico County on the council, said he hopes the program by Sheads will get the ball rolling among historians or organizations to investigate the ties the Lower Shore had to the war.

"There has never been a comprehensive study or research about what took place here and the individuals involved on the War of 1812," he said.

There's War of 1812 history to be found in a church cemetery on Deal Island, said Aaron Horner, research assistant at Salisbury University's Nabb Research Center.

"Jacob Webster (1786-1869) served in the war and is buried in the St. John's Methodist Church cemetery, near his father-in-law, the legendary Rev. Joshua Thomas. Thomas preached to the British on Tangier Island and prophesied that they would lose in their attempts to take Baltimore," Horner said. "Webster's father, William, had served in the Revolutionary War, so the family had a background in fighting the British."

According to Parks, the LESHC has also tentatively located the grave site of a British officer, a casualty of the War of 1812, who was buried on Smith Island.

In Worcester County, the landmark Fassit House was attacked by the British, who shelled the brick structure. Legend says that the occupants of the house fled just before the shelling, burying the family silver nearby, and that it was never recovered and is still sought today by treasure hunters.

Across the Nanticoke River from Wicomico County, below Vienna, the British pillaged and set fire to the home of Gov. John Henry, supposedly destroying it. Why the British specifically singled out Henry's home remains a mystery. In Vienna, they fired shot into the riverside town.

In Somerset County, along Monie Creek, is the home place of Gov. Levin Winder who was in office when the British sailed up the Chesapeake Bay. Winder, not getting much-needed assistance from the federal government for protection, ordered the state militia to protect key spots along the bay. The militia could not stop the British from sailing up the Potomac River and sacking and burning Washington.

At Poplar Hill Mansion in Salisbury, Winder's portrait is given a place of honor in the house museum, as he was related to the earlier builders of the home.

It's known, too, that Berlin's native son, Stephen Decatur, who commanded the frigate "United States," captured the British ship "Macedonian" near Boston on Oct. 25, 1812.

Even the old cannon, known as "The General," on the lawn of the old Wicomico Circuit Courthouse is thought to have been a War of 1812 relic that descended in the Humphreys family.

This and other historical footnotes can be found in a variety of sources, but what's needed is a collective source about the War of 1812 on the Shore, according to Horner.

"It really is like pulling teeth to find enough information even to present to a high school class," Horner said. "We have nothing special in the way of diaries, letters or journals pertaining to the war in our area, but we know there was a lot of activity here relating to aspects of the war. There have been a few books published, primarily about the state's involvement in the War of 1812, but nothing about the Shore."

Tickets for the 11 a.m. lunch and program at the Henson Center at UMES, are \$25, and available by calling

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IF YOU GO

What: Lower Eastern Shore Heritage Council luncheon

When: 11 a.m. Wednesday

Where: Henson Center, Princess Anne

Cost: \$25

Info: Call 410-677-4706 or email leshc1@aol.com

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